



GETAWAYS

By Gauley,

get your thrills in

Fayetteville

Jump into a raft or off of a bridge

BY MONICA OROSZ

Fayetteville has played host for years to adventurous types willing to jump into rubber rafts and give its New and Gauley Rivers a high-flying go.

Thousands of people flock there through its distinct river seasons, from early wilder rides on the New River to more sedate summer floats to the wildest of all, fall's Upper Gauley season, which starts the weekend after Labor Day and runs weekends only through October.

Coulee and Megan Prince of Morgantown have experienced it all as veteran river guides for Songer Whitewater, which is how they met in 1999.

They served as guides full time through 2001, leading what Megan

Prince described as a "vagabond lifestyle, never knowing where we would plant our feet." Eventually, they moved to her hometown.

And though Coulee's day job takes him over the Pennsylvania border to work at Nemaquin Woodlands Resort, they still make the 140-mile trip from Morgantown to Fayetteville, down Interstate 79 to U.S. 19, as often as they can.

"It takes me about two and a half hours and it takes my husband two," Megan Prince said. "But it's a nice drive. Once you're south of Clarksburg, it really mellows out."

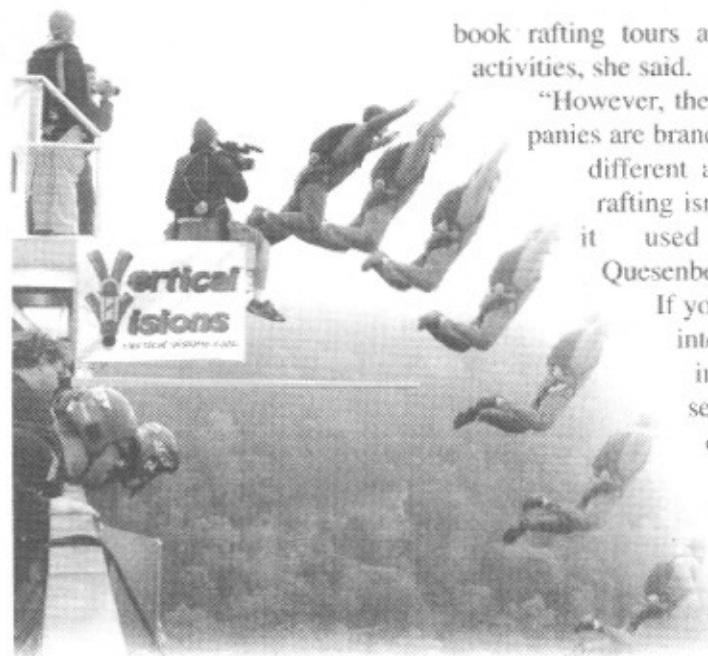
Coulee Prince recommends novice rafters first try a summer New River trip before venturing to the Gauley. But adults of all ages

can be seen on the Upper Gauley, many of them folks who return year after year once they get hooked on the thrill.

River guides offer a wealth of history and river tidbits as you paddle. Did you know, for example, that the New River is one of the world's oldest rivers and that it is unusual because it runs north?

About 30 area outfitters can set up any outdoor enthusiast — or someone who wants to be one — with the equipment and if necessary, the tours, not only for rafting, but also hiking, biking and climbing, said Calantha Quesenberry of the Fayetteville Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Generally, separate outfitters



Once a year on Bridge Day, BASE (named for building, antenna, span and earth) jumpers are permitted to take a flying leap off the 876-foot high New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville.

book rafting tours and the other activities, she said.

"However, the rafting companies are branching out into different areas because rafting isn't quite what it used to be," Quesenberry said.

If your interest is in a more sedate river experience, consider a summer New River rafting trip, appropriate for the inexperienced and even chil-

dren, in many cases.

Starting the weekend after Labor Day, the river stakes rise — literally — on the Upper Gauley. That's when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers schedules a series of 23 releases from the Summersville Dam that boosts the river levels.

Fans of fall Upper Gauley season say there's nothing like it, though it's not for the faint of heart, the inexperienced or those under age 16.

The 26-mile stretch of the Upper Gauley becomes a tangle of 60 rapids, many ranking into Class V or VI (translation: the biggest of the big).

Those who desire something a little tamer can still enjoy the Gauley in fall by opting for the Lower Gauley and its 35 rapids.



Megan and Coulee Prince of Morgantown spent time as raft guides in Fayetteville, and now travel to Fayette County as often as possible to take on the rapids of the New and Gauley Rivers.

Bridge Day, held on Oct. 20. You can watch while true adventurers throw themselves (and their parachutes) off the New River Gorge Bridge — at 876 feet high, the tallest vehicular bridge in the Americas — on the only day all year it is permitted.

In addition to the outdoor opportunities, Fayetteville offers many adventures in dining. Area restaurants have

boosted their offerings considerably in the last 10 years, turning out sophisticated meals in settings both beautiful and relaxed.

In other words, there's no need to change out of your Teva sandals to dine after earning an appetite out on the rivers.

Steven Keith, advertising manager for the state Division of Tourism who also writes a newspaper food column, has noticed the evolution of restaurants in the Fayetteville area as tourism flourished, with many visitors coming from areas such as Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh.

"As a response to that, the town needed to offer a little more cosmopolitan dining experience," he said. "And restaurants have become more upscale than your bologna sandwich."

Cathedral Café is a great example of how Fayetteville evolved, Keith said. It opened as a coffee shop and bookstore. "Its popularity was among, for lack of a better term, the granola crowd," he said.

As others found their way to the charming building with a huge stained glass window, the coffee shop added snacks, then lunch and now serves dinner, too.

His visits also have taken him to Smokey's on the Gorge, owned by Class VI River Runners and named in a Food



Boasting the tamer New and Lower Gauley Rivers and the more wild Upper Gauley, the Fayetteville area offers something for just about every rafter. Outfitters can set visitors up for a river run or even climbing and biking

Network "Best of" episode.

With an open-air, timber-frame style that overlooks the gorge, "It's beautiful," Keith said. "It's a combination of rustic and elegant. They really put an emphasis on great food."

And even though they serve buffet style, "It's not your mama's buffet. What strikes you is that everything is so fresh. Then you take it back outside and eat it on these huge tables under trees that hug the gorge."

Sedona Grille offered primarily Southwest dishes such as fajitas and quesadillas and became so popular, it moved to bigger digs on U.S. 16. "They added great steaks, soups, expanded their repertoire," Keith said.

As for the Princes, when they head into town for a bite to eat, Megan said, the couple often stops at Pies & Pints on West Maple Avenue in Fayetteville.

"They have killer pizza and beer," she said.

She loves the coffee at the Cathedral Café and Book Store — yes, it's really in a former church — as well as Mexican offerings at Mountain Laurel Restaurant and the great burgers at Rose's Hideaway in nearby Hico on U.S. 60.

"There are hidden gems, too," she said of the latter. ■

*For more information, check out
www.newrivercountry.com, www.876feet.com or
www.visitfayettevillewv.com or call (304) 574-1500.*